

Making Connections: Direct Support Staff as Bridge Builders

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Community.

Now *there's* a word we hear often. It's interesting how much the service system uses the word. Community Integration Program, Community Options Program, Adult Community Services, Community Based Residential Facility...you get the idea.

I think the system *should* use the word community, and of course go beyond words, so that community is actually reflected in the system's response to people with disabilities. I wonder, for a word so often spoken in our work, how much do we really think about what it means?

I would like to think with you about what community might mean in the lives of people with disabilities you support. My hope is that this paper will be a conversation starter: I have some ideas and some questions about what might lead to community membership—or at least produce a spark to start a relationship—and I'm curious what you think.

For now, let's think of community as meaningful relationships with people and places that exist outside the realm of the service system. Some of these relationships are occasional or temporary. Some are, or could be, deeper and long lasting. The *possibility* of relationship, of interacting with and getting to know someone, is what we're after. If we can at least expand the possibilities, we're on the right track.

Helping make community connections can be intimidating to some people who provide support. This might sound strange, depending on your point of view. If you're nodding, you know what I mean; if you're puzzled, let me explain. Twenty years ago I was sitting in a roomful of mostly case managers. We were listening to a speaker talk about "community building" with adults who have developmental disabilities. Some in the room were excited by this "new" idea—new to most of us anyway. Others were shaking their heads, or wearing concerned expressions. One person said, "I can't do that! I can't even figure out my OWN community connections!" One said, "I'm too shy." Another said, "To be honest, it makes me anxious to try and introduce people to each other, or to ask things of others."

That was twenty years ago, but the wide range of feelings people have about their own ability to do this part of the work is no different today. Many people

think only certain “personality types” can be community builders. While it may be true that some have more of a gift or inclination for it than others, we’ve seen how staff of all stripes can contribute. And THAT is what I want to key into here. The roles that direct support staff have with people put them in a unique position to notice the possibility of a connection, and to help initiate the first steps. From there, it may fizzle out or it may blossom into a wonderful reciprocal relationship. More likely, it will land somewhere in between. But how about testing the waters?

Let’s start with the assumption that you work with one, or two, or a few individuals who would benefit from knowing more people who are not paid to be with them. This could mean neighbors, family members, local business owners—the possibilities are many. I think it is safe to assume this because adults with developmental disabilities often have more relationships with paid support providers than they do with non-paid people. This is true even when people are living and working outside of large facilities. Many people are lonely and isolated, and as important as some paid relationships can be, they’re no replacement for friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers.

I also imagine that you keep busy in your job and may well feel there’s not much time for being a community builder. You work hard, have a lot of responsibilities, have some challenging days, and may feel pressed for time trying to accomplish what is required. So let’s focus on what may be a small yet significant role you could have in helping a person make a connection.

Start with how the person spends her time. Here are just a few questions to consider; the idea is to experiment. Where are there currently relationships or potential relationships? Who does she see throughout the week? Does she have a job? If so, where? How does she get there? Is there “down” time on certain days or evenings that could be used more creatively than, say, watching TV? Asking these kinds of questions can prompt some ideas, like building upon an existing acquaintance relationship with someone at work or on the bus.

Periods of leisure or unstructured time may also be a place to begin. There’s a difference between going to a movie and going to a neighborhood hangout like a coffee shop. Nothing wrong with movies—there’s just not much opportunity to get to know other people. The simple act of introducing the person you support to the shop owner (especially if it’s a shop the person would enjoy returning to) could at least lead to one more acquaintance, and who knows—maybe more.

Also, consider the person’s interests. What someone finds fun or cool or exciting is often the starting place for exploring connections. Does she like swimming? Gardening? Hip-hop? Being with kids?

Jason, a support worker I know, knew there were a few evenings each week when Don had nothing planned. Since Jason spent that time with Don, he

initiated a conversation with Don about some ideas for getting out to have some fun together. Don loves polka music, so Jason did some investigating. He figured, “We’re in Wisconsin—this shouldn’t be too hard!” Before long, Don was a regular for Monday night polka at Vern’s Club, where he met and got to know other polka lovers. They share a common interest and all look forward to Mondays. Notice how this example takes into account both the way Don had been spending his time *and* an interest he has.

Maybe the person you support sees a certain neighbor several times a week, but does not know the person beyond “Hi.” You could help with a next step—and there are many possibilities. Invite the neighbor over for coffee, deliver some fresh-baked cookies, or simply linger a little the next time the “Hi” happens. One small step is still a step in the direction of community, and can make a big difference.

It is also important to remember that the person you’ve met (neighbor, co-worker, shop owner, etc) may be as interested as the person you support in this new possibility. Community members often say they are glad to be invited into someone’s life, and they may not have initiated the contact on their own—for any number of reasons.

These invitations are not the formal, gold-plated type. I’m talking small, casual, friendly—and doable. You’re not asking someone to make a big commitment here, at least not yet. Rather, you’re helping make it *possible* for some type of relationship to unfold, which may or may not happen. Again, it is the possibility that’s important.

Because of the amount of time and the kind of time you spend with the person, you may be best suited to be a bridge. Direct support staff have the opportunity to get to know people well and be present to watch for the possibilities, whether they are existing relationships that could be deeper, or brand new opportunities. Also, the person may communicate to you, rather than someone else, about an interest she has or someone she’d like to get to know better.

I invite you to think about the role you can have in bridging the gap that often separates people with disabilities from others in the community. Relationships and a greater sense of belonging for a person you support can begin by simply being present, and then taking a small step to encourage the possibilities.